

Duties of Married Life



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*by
Cardinal Mercier*

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NOTE: The following Pastoral Letter, issued by Cardinal Mercier* in Lent of 1909 and then printed with His Eminence's permission, contains so much that is of importance today. Therefore, it is being reissued. The statistics provided in the letter are, of course, those of the date of publication.

DEAR BRETHREN, You cannot be ignorant of the danger that threatens a noble nation—our near neighbor: a nation in which, despite this danger, vast reserves of generosity and greatness of soul still remain. In 1800, in each family in France, there were four or five children on an average; in 1860, there were not more than three; in 1905, there were only two. Taking the homes of France as they are at present and setting aside 11 percent as occupied by bachelors over thirty years of age, we discover that nearly 15 percent have no children at all; 22 percent have one child, 20 percent have two, 13 percent have three; and, at the very most, 18 percent have more than three children.

Further, though mortality is decreasing, the excess of births over deaths diminishes with almost mechanical regularity. In 1902, this excess amounted to 84,000; in 1903, it fell to 73,000; in 1904 to 57,000; in 1905 to 37,000; in 1906 to 27,000. In 1907, there were 20,000 more deaths than births (Reforme Sociale, July, 1908, p. 15).

“Here,” says a German observer, “are more coffins than cradles. Peoples who thus break away from the fundamental laws of life must inevitably disappear, must cease to exist—and that entirely by their own ill-doing.”

Our own [Belgian] nation has prospered exceedingly. In the scale of commercial importance, Belgium, with its seven million inhabitants, occupies the fifth place -- following England, Germany, the United States, and France. But, relatively to her population, she heads the economic movement amongst the peoples of the Old and New World alike. We may feel a measure of patriotic pride in these material achievements, but at the same time we cannot avoid the dismal consciousness that, in certain districts of our country, the plague from which France is suffering so fearfully has made decided progress. Being aware of this state of things, we must conceive the most lively apprehension respecting the future of our fatherland. Doubtless, the population of Belgium is still increasing; the death rate, moreover, is not as great as it was; but the birth rate is falling. As yet, thank God, the decrease is not as great as in France.

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French statistics show no more than 20 births per thousand inhabitants; with us, until 1880 births were 31 per thousand inhabitants. But during the last twenty-five years that level has certainly not been maintained, for in 1890 Belgium could reckon only 29 births per 1,000 and in 1906—a bare 25.

This decrease is most apparent in the Walloon provinces, and yet it is a fact that the number of marriages per annum has grown steadily greater.

What are we to conclude? Simply that the fruitfulness of those unions has been affected for the worse. Throughout the country, towns of any considerable importance show, as a rule, a rapidly decreasing birthrate. In very large urban centers, the death rate is overtaking the birthrate in most alarming fashion. Indeed, cases are known where deaths are in excess of births. Hitherto people have come from the country and settled in the towns in such numbers as to fill the gaps in the urban populations -- thus concealing the danger from us. But some rural districts are being swept bare of inhabitants, and taking the country as a whole, official figures present a steady decrease in the birth rate.

[Birth--rate in Belgium for the years 1901--07:

1901, 200,077:

1902, 195,871;

1903, 192,301;

1904, 191,721;

1905, 187,437;

1906, 186,271;

1907, 185,138.]

A dastardly propaganda, (carried on by means of lectures, pamphlets, newspaper articles, and practical demonstrations) encourages the suppression of child bearing and induces parents to adopt homicidal practices in circumstances and to an extent hitherto unheard of.

Certain doctors are exceedingly to blame for this state of things. Instead of acting as honest advisers to their clients of either sex, instead of enlightening them concerning their moral obligations and supporting them in the day of trial, these men are degraded enough to excuse—if they do not actually encourage—the perverse instincts born of selfishness. These men abandon their social mission, finding accomplices in sundry apothecaries' shops and necessary help at the hands of certain miserable midwives.

And, little by little, into every class of society, there filters a series of rotten, unwholesome ideas, which threaten danger to the unborn child, if they do not render parenthood wholly contemptible. Before long, child bearing will be viewed, not as a duty, but as a burden so inconvenient that it may be— perhaps ought to be—thrown off.

One might ask if public authorities have countered with sufficient energy propaganda so utterly destructive of the nation's future. Are they suitably equipped to meet and beat it? Have fathers of families displayed the watchfulness they should in bringing to justice the ruffians who, relying on our

The Civil Court of Lille, by a verdict, pronounced on June 6, 1907, gave judgment in favor of three good working men who claimed damages for the introduction into their homes of a certain indecent prospectus. The Court decided that the inviolability of men's homes must be secured against the wholly unwelcome intrusion of publications offensive to the dignity of the home and pernicious in the highest degree to the morality of the children and other members of the household.

On July 1, 1896, the Civil Court of the Seine had already given judgment in almost identical terms, and quite recently, the Criminal Courts at Charleroi condemned a wretch for publicly disseminating instructions in methods of preventing conception.

May the law deal energetically with the leaders in this vile campaign! May all decent men lend their aid by denouncing promptly and definitely any of these criminal attempts that may come to their knowledge! And may the organs of the press—laying aside all party distinction—unite in the interests of public decency and the future of our country, against the authors and abettors of these neo-Malthusian doctrines and practices!

Nevertheless, public prophylactic measures, however healthy and indispensable they may be, cannot stop the tide without assistance. Why? Because the primary causes of the limitation of childbirth are hidden and personal. The notions of conjugal duty and the healthy and vigorous education of children are either changed or altogether perverted; and these are precisely the notions that must be strengthened in, or restored to, the moral conscience of parents. Brethren, our language may sometimes sound harsh to you and unpleasant, but remember that duty of which we must remind you is, beyond doubt, grave, peremptory, and most inadequately understood. And is it not precisely for that reason that we should impress it upon you the more emphatically, and exhort you, in season and out of season, to fulfill it in all honesty?

Marriage, my brethren, is not a private agreement by which a man and woman freely pledge themselves to an exchange of affection and a community of interests—all the while retaining full liberty to separate on any day they deem it desirable or convenient. Marriage, to be sure, is freely contracted. There must be no compulsion. But once a man and woman—in complete freedom—have made this contract, their union assumes the character of an institution at once religious and national. By their union in marriage, each of the parties confers a sacrament upon the other; they are themselves the ministers whom Our Lord Jesus Christ employs for the communication of that sacramental grace of which He is the author.

The object of this grace is to place the husband and wife in a position to face the difficulties and bear the burdens entailed by the duties they have taken upon themselves.

“This is a great mystery,” said Saint Paul, “great before Christ and the Church (*Sacramentum hoc magnum est; ego autem dico in Christo et in Ecclesia*).”

As Christ desired to unite Himself to the company of believers that He might lead them to the happiness of Heaven, just so a man joins himself to the woman of his choice to the end that, through fusion of their lives, children may be born to them who, in their turn, will carry on the Christian generation. The direct, principal effect of the sacrament of marriage is the continuation of that Church, glorious, without spot or wrinkle—ever young, ever holy, without reproach; that Church for which Our Lord Jesus Christ poured out His blood, promulgated His doctrine, and instituted His Sacraments; that Church which is destined—after a short sojourn in this world of strife, toil, and trial—to glorify God forever in the unruffled, unalloyed peace and joy of Paradise.

When you, brethren, are joined in marriage, when you found a family, you provide the Church of Christ with the natural channel for the transmission of her vitality. And since this transmission cannot take place normally except by the exclusive union of man and wife and their unfailing co-partnership in the education of their children, their wills are pledged to their marriage and bound up with it indissolubly. After they have given themselves one to the other before the representative of the Church, who blessed their union, they are no longer free to withdraw their consent to that union. There, you perceive, is the reason why the Church has always claimed the right of adjusting matrimonial legislation.

Furthermore, there can be no doubt that marriage is also a civil institution—a detail of public order—which the State cannot ignore. It is of vast importance that properly constituted unions should by no means be confounded with those short-lived intrigues that last as long as the caprice of passion dictates. At the same time, that which, in ambiguous language, is called a civil marriage is really no marriage at all—it is nothing more than an official acknowledgement of the civil effects involved by the only union worthy the name of marriage—a religious marriage.

In Belgium and in other countries under the Napoleonic Code, the contracting parties present themselves to the magistrate before the marriage is solemnized, therefore the recognition by the law of those effects which it must legalize takes place by anticipation. Let there be no misunderstanding in this matter: at whatever time the temporal authority intervenes to regulate the legal effects of a Christian marriage, it supposes that marriage to be an accomplished fact—or it ought to suppose it to be so; and it can do no more than turn to account a state of things already existing—or presumed to exist. This state of things can arise only through a marriage ratified by the Church, not otherwise.

We have said then, brethren, that the union of a Christian man and wife is indissoluble, as is its divine antitype—the union of Christ with His Church. Christ impregnates our souls with His grace and makes them bring forth the fruits of holiness. Now the primordial *raison d'être* of the union of man and wife is the foundation of a family, the procreation of children, whom they have the honor, not less than the obligation, of bringing up in Christian faith and morality. To these children they are commissioned to hand down the treasures that they themselves have inherited by the fact of their incorporation in the society called the Church.

It is clear, therefore, that marriage has for its primary end a duty from which married people cannot withdraw themselves; save in the wholly exceptional case where, by mutual consent, they agree to seek in voluntary continence the realization of a higher ideal—the mortification of the senses and closer attachment to God and their spiritual interests.

How utterly mistaken then are those who represent marriage as a union of which the object is physical love and self-interest the condition! No doubt, the material necessities of life must find a place in the considerations of those who wish to marry. That is as it should be, for married life and the care of a family to come are not matters to be undertaken in haphazard fashion. But foresight must not become mere calculation; their hopes should not degenerate into a sordid and usurious speculation.

Again, the attractions of conjugal life are certainly legitimate; nor is it in any way forbidden that men and women should be drawn by them, for they are in the nature of a reward for the acceptance of the burden of paternity and the duties of motherhood, agonizingly painful as these latter often are. Just as nature attaches a sensible pleasure to eating and drinking—functions by which the life of the individual is sustained—so she has placed in the attractions of love a guarantee of the perpetuation of our species.

But whether the individual or the species is considered, the satisfaction of sense is only justified by the particular function that it presupposes and is bound to ensure. And as rational nature revolts from the grossness of gluttony and drunkenness, so also—but far more emphatically—does she denounce sensual pleasures when sought outside of and apart from that order which she, Nature, has laid down for the transmission of life.

Brutes have nothing but instincts: these they cannot but obey, for they are incapable of moderation or self-restraint; but man is privileged to be able to elevate love to the dignity of a rational emotion. Marriage is the fusion of two human lives. It is the union of the bodies, frail to be sure, and destined soon to fade and perish, but above and beyond this, it is the union of two souls, whose minds act together

for the completion of their thoughts, whose hearts are united that their joys and consolations may be doubled by exchange, whose wills become as one will, that each may furnish the other with help, strength, and energy to support their personal trials and fulfill their part in the grand work of bringing up a family to serve God, our Lord.

Man is not the slave of his passions; he has, to a large extent, the power to master them, to direct them by his intelligence and subject them to serve a proper end; and from the empire he exercises over them, his moral dignity arises. Should he abdicate his sovereignty in favor of his passions, shame is his portion; and his conscience, fallen from its estate, becomes debased, degraded. Materialists have striven mightily to force upon our observation the evidence of their animal origin. They would have experienced less difficulty in proving that their principles—if carried to a logical conclusion—would reduce morality to a meaningless word, and that the best amongst them, even as the worst, had not yet passed the animal stage.

If man were merely matter, all his functions would be organic; they would belong to one and the same order. In that case, it is hard to see why a man should be reckoned as foul and degraded because he yields without restraint to one of these functions rather than another. In any materialistic conception of Nature, resistance to the peremptory demands of passion—in other words, virtuous endeavor to overcome Nature—becomes an utterly senseless proceeding.

As for you, brethren, who have kept in your hearts a loyal regard for the laws of Christ and of Christian morality, you confess that it is your honorable duty to resist heartily the tyranny of passion. You will acknowledge and proclaim, without boastfulness, but without faltering, that those who allow themselves to become thralls to vice or slaves to selfishness, who seize the joys of conjugal intercourse and refuse obedience to the laws that govern the reproduction of life are rebels against God and the Gospel of His Christ. They are false to all that gives a man the dignity that should be his.

Catholic husbands and wives, make an end, I beg you, of reading, or allowing your imagination to batten on, the unwholesome literature to be found in the modern novel, the newspaper, the problem-play, where morality is made of no account, where man and woman seek for and find one another solely for purposes of pleasure, and where greed and vice supply the motive for everything that is done. Banish from your sight those dramas in which, under pretext of showing you life as it is, the playwrights present you with what they rake from the sewers. Vicious characters—men and women—stalk the boards, made attractive by all the arts of their willing creators; meanwhile honesty and decency provide a dull and uninteresting background. And, by these maneuvers, certain plausibility is given to the view that morality is impracticable, and that the impossibility of being honestly good offers God's creatures only the alternative of becoming libertines or hypocrites!

As a matter of fact, the loose principles imbibed from modern literature and the stage prove excellent foils for the teachings of Christianity. We have here a study in contrasts, by which no little emphasis and light are thrown on Catholic doctrine. For the romantic and dramatic literature of which I speak knows only one type of man—the proud man, the self-sufficient man, the man who gives rein to his passions, as might any haughty pagan. In the end, this literature arrives at the conclusion that continence and self-restraint are simply impossible.

Christianity is equally aware of the frailty of the human heart, and when she lays her commands upon a man, she at the same time points out to him and provides for him the means he shall use to overcome his weakness. The austere law of self-abnegation and praying to God applies to every one—priest and layman, man and woman, married and unmarried.

To everyone, none excepted, our Divine Savior has said, "If any man will come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow Me." (Luke ix. 23). And again, "Every one of you that doth not renounce all that he possesseth cannot be My disciple" (Luke xiv. 33).

Even in marriage, husbands and wives must place restraint upon their inclinations. Every husband should have that respect and regard for the constitution of his wife that prudence and delicate consideration demand; for a day may come when the necessity of preserving the health of one or the other will place an obstacle between them—even, it may be, for a considerable time. What attention, think you, are they likely to pay to this obstacle, if the very elements of self-restraint are lacking to them? Everybody knows well that temperance and sobriety place a definite limit to eating and drinking.

Conjugal chastity is the more necessary inasmuch as the impulses it arouses and regulates are more blindly imperious. And you must not exclaim that I ask of you that which is impossible.

Saint Augustine will tell you, in words the Council of Trent thought well to repeat, that God never asks the impossible, but He expects that, having done what in you lies, you should call in His grace to help your insufficiency. One of the effects of the sacramental grace received in marriage is to prepare the husband and wife for the most trying hours in their married life—for the times when the spirit indeed is willing but the flesh very frail.

Husbands, Christian men, you do desire, honestly and sincerely, to remain unswervingly faithful, do you not? Ask God then—ask Him every day of your lives—to give you courage that never fails. And you, Christian wives, are you afraid of the dangers of motherhood? Those dangers are not so great as many are pleased to assert. But if, as may happen in exceptional circumstances, a surgeon must be called in, well, modern surgery is such that you may place the greatest confidence in it; for it is an established fact that nowadays a good operator saves the mother's life in 95 percent of the cases submitted to him. And yet, small as it may be, the danger of an operation calls for a courage that can only be assured to you by prayer and trust in Him to whose everlasting arms you have committed yourselves.

Husbands and wives, remember your heavenly origin, your immortal destiny. Leave to those in whose eyes marriage is nothing more than a union of which sensual pleasure is the sole end, the degrading idea that passion is sovereign, indomitable, lawful at all times. You must ascend to higher ideals. Let your marriage be a real union of your bodies and your souls; let your joys be sober and moderate. But see well to it that you do not seek those joys for themselves alone, nor apart from the fulfillment of the conditions Nature has established for the foundation of the family.

I fully appreciate, my dear brethren, your state of mind on this subject. You have no desire to ignore either self-restraint or the mutual respect imposed upon you by the dignity of conjugal life and the primary end of marriage. But, should any one remind you of the mandate God gave in the beginning—"increase and multiply"—you gaze round you in dismay, measuring the harsh conditions of life as you find it—the tyrannous demands of custom, convention, and fashion; you peer into the future, fearfully wondering how your children, if they become more numerous, are to succeed in keeping that place in society which, with most justifiable pride, you occupy yourselves. "Who," you ask in your anxiety, "says it is your duty to lower the social position of our children? And if continence is beyond our strength, can you blame us for using our marriage rights and evading the natural result—the birth of children?"

Well, if you are in easy circumstances, who have a modest competence, or who have amassed, it may be, a fortune more or less considerable, if you are warranted in using language of this sort, what might we not expect from the humble workman who carries on a hand-to-mouth existence on scanty pay?

What might not be said—and with far greater justice than in your case—by the toiler of the fields or the factory hand, who labor, labor unremittingly, and for all that hardly know what it means to have something laid by for a rainy day or to regard the future without misgiving?

Believe me, I understand your anxieties to the full. I will even add that, given the strong undercurrent of self-indulgence that is traversing the social body, given the narrow, the “middle-class” ideas that many people select as the goal and guiding-star of their lives, and consequently of the preparation by which they endeavor to shape their children’s careers—given these things, then your anxieties need no explanation. In fact, they would be justified, were the reasoning that inspires them anything but false and unfounded.

Not very long ago—certainly since 1880—Bebel, a well-known socialist leader in Germany, described as “repugnant” the maneuvers of married people who satisfy their sensual appetites, but with deliberate selfishness take measures to prevent the birth of children. Nowadays, forgetfulness of Christian morality joined to the flourishing condition of what is called, by a strange contradiction, the morality of selfishness, and the direct encouragement given—here openly, there in secret—by the “liberal” economists of the last century and by numerous socialist journals of today—all these tend to weaken our conception of the binding nature of conjugal duty, and incline parents to adopt a lower view than they should of the grandeur and importance, both social and religious, of the education of their children.

Imperceptibly, the most dastardly practices seem less loathsome, less worthy of blame; and if you, dear Christian parents, do not decide to offer a resistance of the utmost vigor, you will live to see crime installed—a not unwelcome guest—in your inmost homes. Vice, moreover, has a tendency to turn to its own advantage the unwholesome favor of public opinion. It is not unusual for decent married folk to find themselves exposed sometimes to the galling commiseration of people who seem to have forgotten that duty comes before the follies of luxury, fashion, and the pursuit of comfort, sometimes to the malicious sneers of renegades who esteem themselves smart because they have thrown over the dignity of home life: and this because these good, decent people have loyally done their duty, regardless of the uncertainties of the future. Of a similar description is the fact that, when certain parents discuss the conditions of the marriage contract in the presence of their children, selfish speculation disguises itself in the cloak of prudence in order to impose shameful limits or compromises on the generous whole-souled integrity of the young couple.

Well, dear parents, these speculations—as bad as they are good—rest on the same great fundamental error. You forget and misapprehend what you owe your children. No one is likely to blame you because, being sixty years old and weary after a life of toil, you desire the restful security and ease to be found in your possessions—moderate or large. But your children, fifteen or twenty years old, on the threshold of life with its struggles and straits—what have they to do with restful ease? What they want is confidence and energy. Give it to them: give them force; give them buoyant courage, give them fearlessness.

Teach them that their social duty is to produce before they consume. They must not, being young, examine the possibility and conceive in secret the hope of profiting by the savings that your death will place in their hands—and all without their lifting a finger. No; they must feel the prick of necessity. Therefore, you must not think you are acting wisely in urging your children to rest content with that place on the social ladder that your energy and thrift have helped you to attain.

You must teach them that the point they start from is of small importance. That what really matters is the point where they arrive. The most lamentable service parents can render their children is to exempt them—not from the law of labor, because that is superior to their wills, but from the necessity of labor, without which can be formed neither strong characters nor a hardy people.

Brethren, have you forgotten your catechism? Sloth is one of the seven capital sins; that is, it is one of the poisoned sinks from which all other vices may flow. You would like your daughters to have such dowries as would remove the idea of their being sought after simply for themselves—for their beauty—of body, mind, and character—for their fitness to become mothers and to assume successfully a mother's duties. It would be far better for them if they should never marry than that they should be delivered up, innocent victims, to the pleasures of rakes and rufflers, who, after a tempestuous youth, are conscious of an attenuated inclination to reform, though in point of fact they are only yielding—unwittingly, it may be—to an imperative desire of bodily comfort and enjoyment without unpleasant aftermath.

Again, you would like each of your sons to step into an established position, protected from all risk, thus depriving them of every incentive to healthy and fruitful initiative, and procuring them ready-made success they have done nothing to earn. Can you not see that instead of educating them, that is, instead of helping or compelling them to make the most of the resources Nature has given them—their brains, their will, their muscles—you are only pandering to their conceit and their laziness and assisting the incubation (in the hearts of the children you love and in whom it is your ambition to see your second selves) of the worst instincts of the human beast? Have you never heard the malediction hurled at the sluggard by Saint Paul, the most splendid intrepid pioneer of Christian civilization, “*Si quis non vult operari, nec manducet?*” (“If any man will not work, neither let him eat.” 2 Thess. iii. 10).

Quite recently a careful observer of contemporary conditions mentioned, in our presence, a club where young men squander in gambling or vapid and pointless babble as much of their time as is not wasted on sport or the theatre or worse amusements. Alluding to the catastrophe that overwhelmed Messina, he added, “Should that club suddenly collapse, and should those who haunt it cease to cumber the ground, Belgium would not be a penny the worse and industry, politics, science, and art would go on exactly as they did before.”

Is it not shameful that, instead of setting a good example—as, in their position, they ought to do—these young fellows prefer to provide matter for caustic remarks such as I have just quoted?

In splendid contrast to these scurvy specimens are those families among the aristocracy and the middle and laboring classes where numerous children, like olive branches, surround, with a large and vigorous crown, the parent stem from which they spring, filling the home with life, movement, and the light of joy: where the warmth of filial and brotherly love prevents the parents thoughts from dwelling too insistently on the difficulties and trials inseparable from human existence, and gives them promise of an honored age, knowing neither loneliness nor abandonment.

Tell me, is there a finer sight in this world, is there anything more comforting, more worthy of our deep respect than one of those families, still numerous—God be thanked!—in the midst of our good people, and especially so among the working classes; families where six, eight, ten, and more children grow, develop, and take shape in the school of labor, aye, even in the sterner school of privation and sacrifice? Those are the workshops where strength and energy are forged, where character is stamped upon a man.

“Where I inspect those who are ascending the social ladder and those coming down, I observe that the former wear clogs and the latter patent-leather shoes,” says Paul Leroy Beaulieu, an economist of the highest authority.

Now, of course, I am quite aware, dear fellow-workmen, that all your sons are not going to climb the social ladder. I should be sorry indeed if you desired them all to make their fortunes in the city. No, many will remain with you in the village where they were born. But, the very congestion in your home will drive some of its members to join the swarming hives where industrial activity is concentrated.

There, as the rush of newcomers becomes greater, the inventive spirit becomes keener, machinery more perfect; the products of the earth are exploited with more knowledge and greater thoroughness, and business openings are sought for more fiercely. Thus, by reason of the very condensation of town population, industrial and commercial progress has been greatly accelerated.

Now who is the best equipped and therefore the most likely to succeed in this economic turmoil? It is the young man who comes of a large family. Broken to a life of toil from his youth, schooled to endurance, endowed with a character softened and sweetened by the gentle friction of family life, and possessing a will, strong but well controlled, he has in his own hands the makings of a fine career. When the spirit of Christ is at work in a family, the older children become the watchful guardians of the little ones, the strong ones assist the more intelligent to rise in their profession. Each one recognizes the obligation of helping the other and, through this mutual help, the bonds of family love are drawn tighter and tighter, while the parents contemplate with pride the fruits of their years of toil and cherish the hope of an old age spent in honor and placid security. I know well that there is another side to this genial picture, and I have not the slightest intention of blinking the fact that if you look for dark patches, you will find them. By bringing up a large family, you do not necessarily attain success there and then, but you undoubtedly pave the way to it.

The struggle is hard, but excellent in its results. While the children are young, when one follows closely upon another, the parents may find life very distressing and a brief stoppage of the daily wage through unemployment or the descent of sickness upon the home may plunge them into a sea of grinding sorrow and hardship. That is the truth that nobody denies and nobody has yet discovered how suffering is to be done away with. But mark the difference. The working man who has only one or two children is very likely to see them leave home on the first opportunity, spend their wages in the public-house or some other similar resort, and brutally deny their parents, in their age or infirmity, that pittance that law and decency alike demand of them. But the father and mother, who have brought up many children in the faith of Christ, possess, in the thews and sinews of each of their children, a capital well invested. By placing them under the happy necessity of employing their abilities, they augment the resources of the family and compel its members to the task of self-development with great energy, patience, and love.

Should some unexpected crisis arise for one of these families, public authorities must come to the rescue, and, in their default, private charity must fill the breach. The theories concerning the equality of individuals extolled by the French Revolution have not quite lost their hold upon us yet. Our social legislation is excellent as far as it goes, but it does not go far enough. We must try to grasp more firmly the idea that, in the composition of the social body, the organic unit is the family not the individual. Consequently, we must make it our business to secure, as far as we can, a more equitable distribution of taxation so less shall be asked of those who have many children, and more—to balance matters—of those who have not had the generosity and courage to furnish more citizens to the general society.

I spoke of private charity just now, and I quite expect to be shouted down by such as court favor and popularity with the masses. They will tell you that the receipt of charity is degrading to the people. That, my brethren, is transparent nonsense and unworthy your consideration. That a man should beg when he could live on his pay, if he were minded to work—that is degradation if you like! But our Divine Master has said—what everybody recognizes as a fact—“the poor you have always with you.” And there are poor, unfortunate folk who, in spite of their good will and honest efforts, are altogether—or for the time being—unable to support themselves and their families.

For such as these you demand compulsory assistance and old age pensions. Excellent! There, I am heartily with you. But will you please explain to me in what precise respect the charity contributed by

the taxpayer—with very great reluctance perhaps—carries less dishonor in its train than the help given with spontaneous delicacy by a neighbor or a friend? Charity is, in a sense, humiliating, because it is the badge of dependence and no man likes to be dependent. But, when given in the right place, there is no dishonor attached to it. Just consider for one moment, and you will observe that charity is given and received on every side of you. The young student gets his bursary, the artisan gets his bonus, the scholar has his traveling expenses paid, the man of letters receives an allowance to facilitate the production of some work of literary or scientific interest.

Now we must make every effort to restore to people's mind a correct notion of what genuine Christian charity really is. But more—we must practice it, spurring ourselves on by the remembrance that Our Lord, the better to teach us the grandeur of this virtue, deigned to identify Himself with the hungry, the thirsty, and the sick saying, "Whatever ye do to the least of these My brethren, ye do it unto Me."

Even if it is true that the consciousness of dependence brings with it a certain measure of humiliation, what of that? A man is none the worse for it. Rather, is he the better; for, like pain and sorrow, humiliation, if borne in patience, plays its own part in a man's education and gives him the strength to endure.

If then, my brethren, God has blessed your union with children, cast no envious glance, at those whose homes are empty—rather look with pity on the unions that are barren either through misfortune or deliberate crime. Give your boundless respect and praise and encouragement to those parents, whether rich or poor, who have sufficient reliance upon God and upon themselves to provide us with a plentiful generation, a numerous family that is today, or will be tomorrow, their crown of honor and worth. Their generosity and courage furnish our country with men of energy and character, men destined to fill high places in council or to stand in the forefront of battle; destined to occupy the situations abandoned by sterile voluptuaries who never moved a finger to gain the wealth they most unworthily possess. From these families, the Church will look, and not in vain, for priests, missionaries, and apostles to renew and keep alive unfailingly the forces of religion and charity.

God's blessing on the union of our first parents—"increase and multiply"—is no empty form of words; neither is it a snare to the unwary. The Church does not flatter only to deceive with a vain and illusory dream, when she calls down upon the bride the blessing of fruitfulness and desires that, as parents, she and her husband should see a plenteous seed, their children and their children's children even to the third and fourth generation. Here again, to take a wider outlook, the Catholic Church possesses, in her moral teaching, the principles that will solve one of the gravest questions in social economy. I speak of that problem that has for its object the accommodation of increasing population with the limited productivity of the soil. As a solution of this difficulty, the apostles of neo-Malthusian doctrines—who also practice what they preach—enthusiastically proclaim the voluntary restriction of childbirth and in compensation they offer you the satisfaction of sense in defiance of nature.

There, you have the theory of static sterility, the harbinger, the forerunner of utter ruin to peoples that are base enough to carry it out in practice. In the fourth century before the Christian era, Greece was unequalled in the splendor of her civilization by any other nation; but, after her leaders of thought—even Plato and Aristotle—had preached sterility as a remedy for possible difficulties in the future, there fell upon the land a scarcity of men, as contemporary writers tell us. And, in the second century, Greece lost her independence because there were no soldiers to confront the Roman arms.

What was true of Greece, was true of Rome under the Empire. Voluntary sterility dried up the wellsprings of the city's life and the disruption of the Empire speedily ensued. In France, at the present

moment, men who love their country are sounding the alarm. Listen to this statement recently uttered before a distinguished audience by M. de Foville, the French economist.

“About the year 1850 the territory now occupied by the German Empire contained the same number of inhabitants as France. We were on equal terms. In 1895, Germany had the advantage of us by some six millions. In 1908, the excess reached twenty millions. Thirty-nine millions on one side, on the other sixty millions odd. If matters proceed at this rate, in twenty years time there will be two Germans to one Frenchman—always supposing of course that France is not absorbed by Germany in the meantime.”

Even if we assume that immigration would fill up the empty spaces left by this depopulation, what then? The result would be that France would lose every national characteristic and give place to some strange, mongrel cosmopolitan mixture in which the fine qualities of the race would run vast risk of disappearance.

There is only one doctrine that makes for progress and that is Christian morality, combined with conjugal duty and integrity. On individuals and families alike, it enjoins the necessity of patient and persevering toil. It encourages fruitful initiative and effort; it pours blessings upon large families where initiative and effort bud and blossom. It condemns most utterly the pleasures that consume and do not produce. To all peoples it repeats with untiring iteration the words of Scripture, “Increase ye and multiply: go forth upon the earth and fill it.”

The world is wide enough to contain and support the swelling generations of the children of men, but it does not yield up its treasures easily—they must be wrested from it by main force. The earth is not a heap of treasure that men may share among themselves in such sort that each one’s portion should increase according as the number who ought to have a share grows less. No; but the treasure grows greater in proportion to the spirit, the ability, the courage of those who do battle to acquire it. Man’s life is a relentless warfare—“*militia est vita hominis super terram.*” (Job vii. 1)—civilization is the fruit, progress is the reward of conquest.

There you have the teaching of Christian morality to the family and the nation and, beyond all else, it recalls to us in every page of the Gospel, the theme on which our Savior based His first sublime Sermon on the Mount.

Forget not that you are here upon earth only to leave it. Life for you is no more than a pathway, beset with thorns and brambles, to your abiding city, Paradise. If, as you trudge along it, anxiety and disappointment should bear heavily upon you, then raise your eyes to Him: for in heaven you have a Providence—fatherly, wise, and strong to watch over you and keep your steps that they stumble not.” Therefore I say to you, be not solicitous for your life, what you shall eat, nor for your body what you shall put on. Behold the birds of the air, for they sow not, neither do they reap, nor gather into barns, and your heavenly Father feedeth them. Are not you of much more value than they? And which of you by taking thought, can add to his stature one cubit?

And for raiment why are you solicitous? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they labor not, neither do they spin. But I say to you that not even Solomon in all his glory was arrayed as one of these. And if the grass of the field, which is today, and tomorrow is cast into the oven, God doth so clothe: how much more you, O ye of little faith? Be not solicitous therefore, saying What shall we eat, or what shall we drink, or wherewith shall we be clothed? For after all these things do the heathen seek. For your Father knoweth that you have need of all these things. Seek ye therefore first the kingdom of God and His justice, and all these things shall be added unto you.” (Saint Matt. vi. 25-33).



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